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AUTHOR McKeague, Patricia M.; Reis, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that good writing skills are critical to achieving college and career success, the Communications Department at Moraine Valley Community College (MVCC) initiated a 10-month research and planning process which culminated in the establishment of a Writing Center (WC) in the fall of 1990. The objectives of the WC are to: (1) offer all MVCC students assistance with their writing assignments; (2) encourage excellence in communication skills through one-on-one conferencing techniques; (3) focus on higher order skills, such as thesis, organization, and development, to insure that the writer's message is communicated to the intended reader; and (4) build the writer's confidence. The WC houses 15 microcomputers and is directed by a faculty member who receives nine hours of released time each semester to oversee the operation of the WC. Efforts to promote the WC included distribution of a WC newsletter, articles in the student newspaper, and special announcements by instructors. Fall semester student visits to the WC totaled 1,133. User evaluations revealed that 83% of the students believed the tutoring sessions improved their writing skills; 87% felt that the tutoring improved their grades on writing assignments; 71% rated the WC as excellent; and 100% intended to use the WC again. By the end of the spring semester, an additional 1,313 student visits to the WC were recorded. Full- and part-time Communications instructors work as tutors at the WC on a volunteer basis, while student peer tutors act as paid staff the WC. Student tutors must complete Composition I and II and be recommended by an instructor to be eligible. (PAA)

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Development of a Writing Center: A Bright Idea

Patricia M. McKeague
Elizabeth Reis

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Moraine Community College
Palos Hills, Illinois

JC 910431

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Development of a Writing Center: A Bright Idea

The decision to create a writing center at Moraine Valley Community College was based on significant educational issues. In 1988, a Critical Literacy Committee began as an effort to encourage writing across the curriculum and then broadened to encompass all aspects of critical thinking. It soon became obvious that much of the literature on critical thinking skills emphasized the importance of writing as thinking and writing as learning.

Then in the October 1989 issue of College Composition and Communications, an article entitled "Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" included this statement concerning the effective teaching of writing on the college level: "The effectiveness of classroom writing instruction is significantly improved by the assistance students receive in writing centers. . . . Because these centers enhance the conditions of teaching and learning, their development and support should be an important departmental and institutional priority."

Realizing that good writing skills are important in achieving college and career success, the Communications Department decided to investigate the possibility of developing a writing center at Moraine Valley. After ten months of research and planning, The Writing Center became a reality, opening each weekday morning in the fall semester, 1990, in a classroom adjacent to the Library.

To clearly define The Writing Center's place in the curriculum, the staff established the following objectives:

1. To offer all Moraine Valley students assistance with their writing assignments;

2. To encourage excellence in communications skills through one-on-one conferencing techniques;
3. To focus on higher order skills--thesis, organization, and development--to insure that the writer's message is communicated to the intended reader;
4. To build the writer's confidence in his or her ability to communicate effectively, thus enabling the writer to become independent of support services.

Appropriateness to Target Audience

The Communications Department decided that the target audience for the first semester would be the students enrolled in Communications 101. To make them aware of the new service on campus, articles were placed in the student newspaper and a newsletter was developed for distribution to everyone registered in the course. Instructors were also asked to tell students about The Writing Center and to encourage their use of this new service.

The results of this campaign were impressive. By the end of the fall semester, student visits numbered 1,133. The evaluation conducted at the end of the semester indicated that 83% of the students believed the tutoring sessions improved their writing skills and 87% felt that the tutoring improved their grades on their assignments. Because of many student requests, in the spring semester The Center's hours of operation were extended an hour each day, and evening hours were added on Tuesday and Wednesday. In addition, the target audience was widened to include any student who wanted help with any writing assignment. Thus far in the spring semester, student visits number 1,313. Students in courses ranging from humanities and psychology to history and

criminal justice have come for writing assistance.

Uniqueness of The Writing Center

The professional staffing in The Writing Center is unique because it is volunteer. Full- and part-time Communications instructors spend one or two office hours a week working in The Center without receiving an additional stipend for their time, a tribute to their professionalism and their concern for excellence.

Other staff members are peer tutors, students who have competled Composition I and Composition II at Moraine Valley and who have been recommended by their instructors because of their writing and human relations skills. Using students as mentors is a plus because some students feel more comfortable talking about their writing with a peer than with an instructor.

To help attract and train peer tutors, the Communications Department designed a new course entitled Advanced Composition (Com 202) in which students develop their skills by tutoring in The Writing Center. Time is spent in the classroom studying writing theory, and then the students spend time in The Writing Center applying those theories.

The Writing Center also offers students a chance to learn word processing skills. The Center is equipped with fifteen IBM PC's, and Communications instructors and librarians offer workshops throughout the semester so that students can learn to use Professional Write to prepare their writing assignments.

Budget Feasibility

The Writing Center became a reality because of the Academic Computing Committee's sharing of fifteen IBM PC's and the Division of Academic Affairs' willingness to fund the project. The major budget

expenditure is salary. Currently the director is given nine hours of released time each semester to oversee the operation of The Center and the training of peer tutors, another faculty member is given three hours of released time to oversee the computer network, and student tutors are paid $4.25/hour.

The cost of computer repair is budgeted by Instructional Technologies, while the cost of computer supplies is shared by the Division of Liberal Arts and Instructional Technologies.

Evaluation

An evaluation of The Writing Center's services was conducted at the end of the fall 1990 semester by the Institutional Research Department, and the same evaluation form is currently being distributed to students this semester. The fall findings indicate students view tutors as interested helpers who can assist them with the writing process. The results also show that students believe the help they receive in The Writing Center improves their writing skills and their grades. One hundred percent of the respondents indicated that they plan to use The Writing Center in the future, and the overall evaluation showed that 29% rate The Center as good while 71% rate it as excellent.

Replicability

Since most institutions with writing centers have reported improvement in the quality of student writing, thereby enhancing the possibility of college success and retention, institutions without such a facility can easily begin one. Leadership can be provided by a full- or part-time faculty member who recognizes the role writing plays in thinking and learning. The center can be located any place where there is room for tables, chairs, some resource materials, and--if one's

budget allows--computers equipped with easy-to-learn word processing software. Most writing centers can be started on a limited budget if they have the support of both the faculty and the administration.

By assisting students in developing their writing skills, a writing center can help increase retention in writing classes, encourage writing across the curriculum, and ultimately improve the performance of students at transfer institutions. Writing well is vital to college and career success.

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